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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE

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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: April 06, 2007

Kdolsky Calls for Limits on Childcare Benefits

11. Andrea Kdolsky, Austria's Minister for Health and Family Issues from the People's Party has called for adherence to the limit of extra income that a person receiving childcare benefit payments while on maternity leave can make. She said the payments must be returned if a person goes over the limit of extra income. The limit is now at 14,600 Euros per year. Kdolsky has announced random probes among recipients of childcare benefits during the past year to check whether they were above the legal income limit. Following Austria's Family Minister Andrea Kdolsky's announcement of random probes among recipients of childcare benefits in connection with the legal income limits for persons having received such payments, Herbert Haupt, former Social Affairs Minister from the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZOe), emphasized he did not want the financial assistance returned. He argued there was no way to control how much parents had earned, semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung says, adding that Heidrun Silhavy of the SPOe was also skeptical that Kdolsky's plan would work. According to Kdolsky, said twenty percent of those receiving assistance had been caught earning extra money when they were investigated. She said there could be controls for people who received aid between 2003 and 2006. It would cost around 300 million Euros additionally per year if there were no controls, she said. The Minister also proposed a new limit of 16,200 Euros annually with more flexibility all around, and urged her new model be given a chance to work. As of now, 60 percent of parents receiving aid prefer the old model of 30 plus 6 months (with 436 Euros per month), while 40 percent favor the new system of 15 plus 3 months (800 Euros per month).

OeVP Divided over Partnership Issue

12. The Conservatives remain divided over legal recognition of same-sex partnerships after Hannes Missethon, the party's general secretary, suggested a notarized contract for both homosexual as

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well as heterosexual partnerships. In the face of harsh criticism from within the party, Missethon said homosexuality is a reality in society and laws must be made realistic. Family Minister Andrea Kdolsky, who is also with the VVP, said on Thursday she stood behind Missethon and called for an end to further discrimination against homosexuals.

All Austrian media report on the ongoing discussions on ways to legally support same-sex partnerships, an issue which has divided the People's Party. Hannes Missethon suggested notarized contracts and called for an end to discrimination against same-sex partners in

housing and inheritance matters, but proposing, that laws against the adoption of children by homosexuals would remain. His move was met with harsh criticism by Werner Amon, head of the party's employees association OeAAB, who said the security of the family must remain in the foreground. Mass-circulation daily Kurier notes the current squabble in the OeVP had come shortly ahead of a party meeting and reveals more clearly than ever before the failures and shortfalls the Conservatives had incurred during their term as leading government coalition party. Centrist daily die Presse meanwhile notes that the opposition parties had "reacted with glee to the OeVP dispute: SPOe [sic! - the Presse ranks the OeVP's coalition partner among the opposition here] party manager Josef Kalina detects 'chaos' within the OeVP, the BZOe has labeled the Conservatives the 'quarrel party' while the Greens have said the OeVP is simply going too far in some of its views." And FPÖ boss Heinz Christian Strache commented that the OeVP "has disqualified itself as a family-oriented party with its proposals."

Ukrainian Premier wants Gusenbauer to Mediate

13. In Ukraine, the power struggle between President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich has deepened. Both politicians are refusing to back down over a new election and are threatening each other with prosecution. The Prime Minister said at a press conference yesterday that he had asked Austria to help mediate the crisis after a phone call to Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer. There has been no formal response from Gusenbauer's office yet. Like all major Austrian media, liberal daily Der Standard reports that Ukraine's Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich told journalists yesterday that he had asked Austrian Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer to mediate in his crippling political dispute with President Viktor Yushchenko. The daily quotes Yanukovich as explaining that he had "decided to call foreign mediators and particularly the Austrian Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer - Austria is a neutral country - as well as other competent European legal experts." The Standard also notes that the Austrian Chancellery has so far declined to comment on this highly critical issue. Centrist daily Die Presse writes that Gusenbauer, having been catapulted rather unexpectedly into the midst of the Ukrainian crisis, could end up caught between the two fronts, as President Yushchenko and his supporters do not appear to be favoring mediation. The daily quotes Gerhard Mangott of the Austrian Institute for International Politics in Vienna, who expressed his "surprise" at Yanukovich's move, stressing that the Ukrainian Premier does "not have specific ties with Austria." He does not believe Austria is going to "expose itself" in the matter: "It would be wrong. Austria cannot afford to embark on such bilateral missions; this is something that should be channeled through the German EU Presidency."

UN To Publish Climate Report

14. The second part of the United Nations' report on climate change is expected to be published in Brussels today, dealing with the likely consequences of global warming and the impact of climate change on human societies. Austrian media note that UN experts and scientists have reacted angrily to the insistence of government representatives, particularly from the US and China, to water down ahead of the report's presentation the wording of some key clauses, including prognoses on expected water shortages. Although a UN panel is due to publish a key report on the impact of global warming later today, ORF online news reports that presentation of the full text has been postponed at the last minute in the face of pressure from some major countries. Critical clauses have been scrapped from the text, including a paragraph on climate change in the United States, which was "swept under the carpet" because of US pressure, ORF online news writes. Scientists and government officials from more than 100 nations held intense all-night talks in Brussels on a text expected to give the bleakest UN warning yet on the effects of climate change. According to an expert quoted on ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal, cuts of more than 60 percent in carbon emissions will be essential by the middle of the century. He stressed that "the key thing is to understand what is preventable, and beyond that to be wholly and strategically, as well as internationally and institutionally,

focused on avoiding on what can still be avoided." Developments are "potentially going to overwhelm us, it carries on like it has over the last ten years." The UN report also paints a grim picture regarding the shrinking of glaciers, which will affect Austria in particular, ORF radio notes.

Probe into Navy Crew Capture

15. British Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted that no deal was struck and no agreement reached with Iran for the release of 15 British Navy personnel, who returned home yesterday after their thirteen-day detention in Tehran. However, Blair adds, it would be sensible to pursue lines of communication which had been opened up with the Iranian government.

All major Austrian media continue to comment on release of the British sailors from Iranian detention.

Senior columnist for mass-circulation tabloid Kronen Zeitung Ernst Trost argues that the "show around the release of the 15 British soldiers masks the weakening of (Ahmadinejad's) own position. He is big on words, but the masses who voted for him were bitterly disappointed. So far, they have been waiting in vain for the better life he promised. (...) The President needs threat scenarios like the conflict about the nuclear program in order to divert attention from the internal difficulties and rally the people behind him in national solidarity."

In mass-circulation provincial daily Kleine Zeitung, foreign affairs writer Erhard Hutter suggests that Blair's "warning to Iran about the incalculable political costs of an unyielding attitude had an effect at least in the moderate leadership circles of the country. In the end, the pragmatists in Teheran kept the upper hand."

Foreign affairs editor for centrist daily Die Presse Christian Ultsch suggests the "abrupt end of the affair can be explained by one of two possibilities: Either the relatively moderate forces prevailed in the internal Iranian struggle for power or there was a deal with the West - or perhaps both. (...) Still more exciting is another explanatory model: Those forces that strive to consolidate the regional power gain of the past years prevailed in Iran. If Teheran maneuvers itself further into isolation, the advantage that the US-induced toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq has brought for Iran could melt away like butter in the sun."

Harsh Criticism of Pelosi Trip

16. The Bush administration has stepped up its criticism of Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi in the wake of her recent Middle East trip. Vice-President Cheney accused Pelosi of what he called "bad behavior" for telling the Syrians that Israel was prepared to enter peace negotiations. This prompted Israel to say its neighbor must first abandon support for terrorist groups.

Semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung quotes Pelosi as explaining after her meeting with the Syrian President that Bashar Al-Assad has underscored his wish for peace with Israel. She had been "extremely pleased with the President's assurance that he was prepared to re-launch the peace process," Pelosi said. However, according to the daily, after the media floated reports about an Israeli offer of peace talks with Syria, Premier Ehud Olmert immediately denied it, stressing that for Israel Syria remains part of the "axis of evil."

McCaw